Friendship, gender and sexual experience: retrospective narratives about the formation of a sexual self during youth

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Abstract:

In this article, I explore the ways in which friendship contributes to shaping the boundaries of men's and women's sexual experiences. Using inputs from the sociology of experience and the sociology of friendship, I explore qualitative data from a research about sexuality in Portugal, in which I collected sexual biographies of 35 men and women, aged 30-55. In the in-depth interviews, these adult participants, possessing secondary and tertiary education, and living in urban areas, reflected retrospectively about their sexual biography, including their childhood and youth. The main thesis is that the practices of friendship (which structure those relationships as social facts) also help to structure sexual practices and representations and, through them, to construct the contemporary sexual self. Those practices may be discursive ('talking' and 'chatting'), or rather oriented to action ('doing things together'). In this article, I focus on discursive friendship practices, and how they contribute to shaping contemporary sexual experience. Drawing on F. Dubet's sociology of experience, I argue that this relationship is defined in the tension along three dimensions: integration, strategy and subjectivation. This process is cross-cut by gender, as discursive friendship practices interact differently with the dimensions of sexual experience, in that strategy mainly reinforces definitions and enactment of hegemonic forms of masculinity, while subjectivation helps to challenge them and to build plural gender experiences (both feminine and masculine).

Keywords: friendship, friendship practices, gender, sexuality, sexual experience, sexual self, youth

Introduction

What is the influence of friends in the construction of a sexual self? Do friendship practices influence the construction of sexual experience? How do friendship practices shape sexual practices? In this article, I try to answer these questions, using a particular sociological approach that tries to bring together theoretical contributions that are usually treated separately: the sociology of friendship and the sociology of experience. The sociology of sexuality is also evoked, namely in regard to the understanding of specific practices or milestones (for instance, masturbation or first sexual intercourse).

Friendship, gender and sexuality: a sociological approach

Although sociological literature on friendship is not very extensive, the subject has attracted greater interest in recent decades, being recognised as a worthy topic of investigation that helps to shed light on the changes occurring in late modern societies (Jamieson *et al.* 2006; Allan 2011; Allan 2008; Adams & Allan 1998; Pahl 2000; Spencer & Pahl 2006). This growing recognition of the importance of friendship is related to its putative features, deployed in Western thought since the 18th century, and crystallised in ideological assumptions that become visible when people express their expectations surrounding friendship, such as free choice, trust, affection, reciprocity, commitment, help, emotional and instrumental support (Pahl 2000; Spencer & Pahl 2006; Allan 1989; Allan 1996; Adams & Allan

1998; Allan 1998). The boundaries between family and friends become blurred, with friend-like relations occurring among kin and family-like bonds among friends (Pahl 2000; Spencer & Pahl 2006). And perhaps most importantly, friends seem to encapsulate our 'accumulated history', giving us a sense of who we are throughout time (Pahl 2000: 17). Many of these features lead us to an ideal of friendship: an ideology that can hardly be found in real relationships, but which nevertheless remains relevant, as it defines people's expectations of friendship, and thus sets the standard for their affective bonds.

However, to better approach the ways in which friendships are actually lived, one must look into what friends do, together or towards one another, that is, into 'the friendships we live with', rather than the 'friendships we live by' (Jamieson *et al.* 2006: 4). Friendships are built in everyday life, through the sharing of emotions and sentiments, through intimate self-disclosure enabled by discourse, as well as through the sharing of activities, action and goals. Whether it relies more on one or on the other may depend on many different factors, such as the stage of the life-course, since friendships serve different needs at different stages, thus constituting a powerful tool for coping with the passing of time and the changes it brings (Jamieson *et al.* 2006; Pahl 2000). And although sociologists have brought forward the concept of 'friendship practices', drawing on 'family practices' (Morgan 2013), the topic has remained underexplored (Jamieson *et al.* 2006; Author 2016b). More recently, sociologists have addressed the important topic of the emotional content and basis of friendship ties: how emotions are intimately linked with particular features of late modernity, such as reflexivity; how they relate to social change; and their importance for friendship interactions in context (Allan 2011; Holmes & Greco 2011).

Despite these major contributions to the conceptualisation of friendship as a specific form of intimacy that makes it a key element in interpreting social change, most sociological reflection has centred on its relations with other forms of intimate ties, namely kinship and family, and the ways in which it helps to reshape the boundaries of personal life (Jamieson *et al.* 2006; Spencer & Pahl 2006, among others). Therefore, with a few exceptions, little attention has been paid to its intersections with sexuality.

One of these exceptions is the contribution of linking friendship and sexuality from a feminist viewpoint (Roseneil 2006; Roseneil & Budgeon 2004; Roseneil 2004). Here the topic is explored from a gender perspective, with friendship between women presented as a valuable political resource and a powerful means of fabricating positive gender identities. Friendship is taken as radically challenging heteronormative assumptions about personal life, decentring sexual and conjugal relationships, and thus making it possible to imagine its boundaries and meanings beyond family and kinship. It is identified as foundational in the lives of lesbians and gay men, both as a practice and as an ethic, providing emotional support and practical assistance. This relevance of friends in supporting non-heterosexual lives was brought forward in the concept of families of choice (Weston 1997; Weeks, J., Heaphy, B. & Donovan 2001). In the early 90's, Nardi (1992) suggested that friendship networks might replace biological kin. As research into the topic progressed, it showed that these families of choice could include both kin regarded as 'chosen' and non-kin that became identified as kin (for example, 'friends like brothers'; Weston 1997; Weeks, J., Heaphy, B. & Donovan 2001). Moreover, friends do not always play a supportive role, or family a distant one, as Smart (2007) showed in discussing the renegotiation of relationships that follows the decision of non-heterosexual couples to get married.

In my own work, I have encountered among lesbians a narrative that links friendship and sexuality, often presented as a smooth continuity between friendship and sexual interest, friendly care and

romantic relationship, which rapidly converges into 'moving in together' and conjugality (Author 2016a). Likewise, heterosexual women living alone, with no partner, referred to some of their 'friends as lovers', a form of intimacy that helped them to cope with separation/divorce, and to reconstruct their sexual life after a painful turning point (Author 2014). Budgeon (2006) had already found that, when compared to sexual partners, friends were acknowledged as providing relationships that, due to their fluidity, were the more durable, reliable and stable ones.

The logics of sexual experience

Despite the fact that some of the literature on friendship, namely that coming from a social-psychology background, addresses the relationships between sexuality and friendship (for example, the implications of sexual attraction and intimate contact between same- and cross-sex friends: Felmlee *et al.* 2012; Felmlee & Muraco 2009; Hall 2010; Hall 2012; Bleske-Rechek *et al.* 2012; Halatsis & Christakis 2009; Galupo 2009; Galupo 2007; Shepperd *et al.* 2010; Muraco 2005), this debate lacks a contribution from sociology, which would help us to better understand how agency and structure are intertwined to shape everyday experiences of both friendship and sexuality. In this article, I try to make such a contribution, drawing on the theoretical framework of the Sociology of Experience, and placing it in dialogue with the Sociology of Friendship and the Sociology of Sexuality.

In a previous work (Author 2014) I have proposed a conceptual model of *sexual experience,* wherein sexual practices, representations and values are explained as the result of social action, and individuals are viewed as competent social actors who creatively manoeuvre the constraints imposed by social structures to carve their own path in the world, and at the same time actively construct a meaning for their existence. This approach combines contributions from scripting theory, namely sexual scripts, and the Sociology of Experience.

As a sub-category of scripted social behaviour, social scripts (Gagnon & Simon 2005; Simon & Gagnon 1984; Simon & Gagnon 1986; Simon & Gagnon 2003) are frameworks of reference that enable social actors to define the social situation in which they are embedded as sexual, to identify the relevant actors, and to organise their own behaviour. They enable social actors to attribute a sexual meaning to the situation, and imply a complex interaction between the person and her context, where sexual conduct is actively negotiated. These cognitive frameworks of reference unfold on three levels: the intrapsychic (the contents of mental life), the interpersonal (ritualised sequences of events perceived as sexual by intervenient social actors, and which define the situation as sexual), and cultural scenarios (collective definitions that define the range of possibilities, in terms of sexuality). The concept is therefore helpful in understanding how sexual conduct articulates itself with other social practices, such as friendship practices.

On the other hand, the concept of social experience (Dubet 1994; Dubet 2005; Dubet 2004), may be described in three dimensions, or 'logics of action'. The *logic of integration* describes how individual actions are socially constrained by socialising agents and institutions, which compel social actors to adopt previously defined values and roles, either conforming to them, or reinventing them, to a greater or lesser extent. The *logic of strategy* refers to an experience defined in terms of an *identity-as-a-resource* (which includes the player – the person's attributes and aims; and the game – its rules and the ability of the player to enact them); *competition* (other players – who they are, which resources are available to them); *opportunities* – identified and created; *obstacles* (anything that puts the player at a competitive disadvantage); and *power* (the capacity to use our own resources to influence others).

Finally, the *logic of subjectivation* refers to the ways social actors distance themselves from such previously defined identities and social roles, adhering instead to alternative models of existence and identity. It implies, therefore, a critical and reflexive capacity of the self: to think about its own existential possibilities, gaining distance from previously defined models of existence and finding new ways of action. The concept of sexual experience is drawn from this approach, and may thus be defined in the tension between these three logics, inextricably linking what happens in sexual life to what happens in other dimensions of life. The concept tries to explain the diversity of contemporary sexual life in the light of three different and conflicting logics or dimensions: integration, strategy and subjectivation. Through them, individual sexual attitudes, behaviours and beliefs are put into perspective and related to the wider social system that constitutes their context. Furthermore, these logics describe a process of biographical construction, through which contemporary men and women create themselves as sexual subjects through discourses and practices.

This way of conceptualising sexual experience enables us to make sense of the diversity of contemporary sexual biographies, in a social context characterised by post-modern fragmentation whereby individuals are compelled to produce a unique and authentic meaning for their lives (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2005; Bauman 2005a; Bauman 2005b). In the aforementioned work (Author 2014), the combination of the three logics led to the identification of at least six different types of sexual experience, highlighting the complexity and diversity of the process of constructing contemporary sexual selves. Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere (Author 2014, 2016a), some of these logics are particularly important for understanding certain types of experience. For instance, the gays and lesbians in the sample of the abovementioned study built their non-hegemonic sexual identities mainly in the tension between integration (in social roles and values of either dominant groups, or alternative communities), and subjectivation (the ways in which they manage to distance themselves from those integrative identities and claim for themselves an alternative subjectivity). The central element in this process is reflexivity, triggered by a determinant turning point in the biography, which confronts the individual with the fact that the available hegemonic model of private life is inadequate to interpret and make sense of his/her sexual experience. Because such turning points are usually beyond the heteronorm, they challenge the integration of these men and women within conventional, heteronormative roles (Author 2016a). Some similarities with women can be found. Sexual experience is also gendered, with important differences between the way men and women enact the three logics, in different contexts of economic independence, autonomy and gender equality. Despite all the improvements in women's social conditions of life, and the consequent decrease in the gender gap in several dimensions (UE 2015), the gender double-standard in sexual practices and attitudes that has long been identified persists.

Focus and main research questions

My argument in this article is that particular combinations of these three logics help to shed light on the ways friendship practices and norms contribute to shaping the sexual self in terms of sexual values, attitudes and behaviours. The article tries to answer a simple research question: do friendship practices influence the construction of sexual experience? If yes, how? The article thus focuses on what friends *do*, together and towards each other (practices), rather than on what they value or expect (norms and rules). It tries to make a contribution to the sociological literature about friendship by centring on the 'friendships we live with', rather than on those we 'live by'.

In previous research (Author 2016b), I conceptualised friendship practices as *what friends do, together or towards each other*, to keep their friendships alive. Following Reckwitz (2002: 249), 'A "practice" (*Praktik*) is a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, "things" and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion, and motivational knowledge'. Friendship practices are structured around time (everyday life, special events, and rituals) and space (face-to-face or distant encounters, enabled by ICT). A particular kind of practice – the discursive – is talk, which is a strategy for 'catching up' intimacy. Talk emerges also as a self-referential act, in which friends talk about (and share) the friendship itself, suggesting a performative practice of friendship (Author 2016b). Moreover, as Janet Finch (2007) observed in regard to families, friendships have to be displayed, for instance by spending holidays together, organising special dinner parties, or spending Christmas or New Year's Eve together. By displaying their friendship ties, friends constantly re-enact and confirm their particular status (such as intimate vs. fun) (Author 2016b). Following this reasoning, I hypothesise that this kind of friendship practice, namely talk, is particularly relevant in relation to sexuality, as it allows the (re)construction of sexual stories (Plummer 1995) and their integration within one's own biography.

This discussion is undertaken in the context of Portuguese society, taken as a relevant case study of the modernisation and individualisation processes occurring within the sphere of intimacy and personal life, in late modernity. The reasons are, firstly, that Portugal entered these processes quite late and in quite an abrupt way, in part due to its long-lasting endurance under a closed and strict regime imposed by a right-wing political dictatorship (Almeida 2013). Secondly, once it began its modernisation process, the changes were rapid and included important social indicators and values, such as the dual-earner model of the couple and consequent greater gender equality, alongside greater family diversity in terms of practices (divorce, post-divorce families, same-sex families). Changes were also accelerated in the processes of individualisation, with a rising number of individuals, namely working-age women, living alone, and a higher level of educational, professional and residential mobility among the younger generations (Machado & Costa 1998; Almeida 2013). In this context of late, though accelerated, individualisation, Portugal constitutes a relevant case in which to observe the pluralisation of personal and intimate life today: due to its diversity of lifestyles, diversification of the number of sexual and conjugal partners across the life-course, or diversity of sexual trajectories and intimate configurations (Author 2011; 2014). Its relevance also stems from a contradictory profile that articulates pluralisation and diversity along with an ideological commitment to more traditional family values characterised by strong intergenerational obligations, though unequally distributed and based on residential autonomy (Wall & Gouveia 2014). This contradictory profile within the European context has already proved to be heuristic in explaining specific configurations of friendship norms and expectations (Author 2015), as well as continuities of gender inequalities in sexual behaviour (Alarcão *et al.* 2015).

Methods

Empirical data were collected within the scope of a wider research into sexuality in Portugal, as part of a PhD project in Sociology, which led to a doctoral dissertation (Author 2011). The research followed a qualitative design, drawing on Max Weber's (1962; Freund 1968) comprehensive social action approach, and aiming to unveil the hidden meanings assigned by social actors to their actions.

35 sexual biographies were collected, of white men (n=15) and women (n=20), belonging to the urban middle classes, having secondary or tertiary education, and aged between 30 and 55. This choice of sampling criteria was guided by a theoretical hypothesis linked to the individualisation thesis that the study wished to explore. In order to guarantee that the sample included more individualised participants (higher levels of economic independence and autonomy, as well as a reflexive need for authenticity in the construction of personal identity: Beck 2000; de Beer 2007; Singly 2005), it focused on urban middle classes, as they are typically the protagonists of social change linked to social mobility. Participants were sampled via snowball, after diversifying the starting points of the process as much as possible, to avoid typical biases reflecting the researcher's personal network. The final sample is theoretical, comprising multiple cases, and homogenised (Pires 1997) in terms of social background, age and urban residence. Internal diversity is achieved in terms of gender, marital status (or circumstances of private life) and sexual orientation. Drawing on qualitative data from a few cases, the article does not aim at generalising the results from a statistical point of view. On the contrary, the logic is heuristic: through their diversity, complexity and richness, taken in context, these few cases shed light on hidden dimensions of the object of study. The aim is to bring the researcher's gaze as close as possible to the insiders' perspective and the meaning they give to their actions. This kind of methodological approach aims at a different kind of generalisation, usually called theoretical or analytical (Pires 1997), through which one may generalise the logic of explanation found in the grounded data. In other words, one uses what one learnt from the small sample to understand and reason about other similar cases.

The data were collected using the biographical method (Bértaux 1981; Bértaux 1997; Zinn 2004) and in-depth individual interviews taking the form of a life narrative. Hence, the research design assumes that it is possible to reconstruct the individual self and identity by putting a participant in the context of his/her life course. This is done by inviting participants to narrate their own life course, as the act of telling a story is strongly linked with the process of identity construction. Also, biographical research highlights the links between structure and agency, by analysing the development of the individual personality across the life course (Zinn 2004: 7). Interviewees talked about their sexual biographies, going back to their earliest memories, and through these narratives it is possible to recreate the formation of their sexual self during childhood and youth. The article focuses on these adult (30-55) participants' childhood and youth. It is about these adults' experiences as boys and girls, narrated by them in a retrospective exercise triggered by the biographical interview. This approach has two major implications in terms of validity. Firstly, it means that I rely on (personal) memory to reconstruct these contexts and experiences, and memory can be deceptive. This is, moreover, a recurrent issue in biographical research and studies of memory. However, the aim is precisely to reconstruct the subject's lived experience, invested with meaning as it is, and, therefore, to learn how people *remember* those lived experiences. I am interested in understanding if and how people link, in some way, their sexual stories, their friendships and their sexuality, to build a reflexive self. If they recall, and tell, their stories in such a way that this relation becomes evident, it means that it was reflexively integrated within their current identity and history. The second implication in terms of validity is that, as the sample includes a relatively wide age-span (30-55), the biographical reconstruction of these

childhoods will necessarily lead us to revisit distinct historical times, with distinct impacts for the participants of the study in terms of sexual education.

Interviews lasted for three hours each on average and were all conducted by the researcher, in a controlled environment (mainly at the university, though some were conducted at the interviewee's workplace or home) which allowed the necessary discretion and privacy for the display of intimate information. All participants were thoroughly informed, at different moments and by different methods, about the contents of the interview, issues of data and identity protection, the aims of the research, and the conditions of their participation. Once they had agreed to participate, they were explicitly asked to give their informed consent. Moreover, they were informed they could cease their participation at any moment, either during or after the interview. All ethical procedures were reviewed and monitored by the thesis supervisor, as well as by a post-graduation committee that evaluated the projects.

The interviews were conducted in Portuguese, following a protocol adapted from the Kinsey Institute Interview Kit (Brewer n.d.). Aspects such as the place where the interview was held, the symbolic framework (identified as close to a therapeutic situation), and the relationship of trust established in the course of the conversation, were crucial for the production of in-depth, reliable data. Interviews were later transcribed and analysed using a narrative method (Soulet 2002) that privileges the integrity of each interview, and its singularity as a unit, to the detriment of a transversal cut typical of thematic analysis. For this purpose, I resorted to narrative instruments such as 'synopses', 'histories', 'local interpretations', and 'transversal interpretations', following a method that privileges induction from empirical evidence, towards abstract constructs and interpretations. This grounded approach also pays particular attention to meanings ascribed to practices, as well as to the particular contexts in which social action takes place[i]. All personal identification details were fully anonymised. For the current article, the analyses focused on a particular phase of life, namely youth and transition to adulthood, as this is a crucial stage for the formation of the sexual self. All data presented are, therefore, relative to the participants' childhood and adolescence.

Friendship discursive practices and sexual experience: shaping the sexual self

Friends with whom we talk and confide: sharing sexual information and experiences

Empirical data from the interviews highlighted the importance of *talk,* both as a reflexive friendship practice during the years of transition to adulthood, involving the sharing of relevant information, normative milestones and their expected time frame, and as a reference point for expected behaviour. Friends may be perceived, often in contradictory ways, as competitors, as allies and as witnesses. Here, the figure of the (female) confidant appears particularly important among both boys and girls, offering an external, hopefully compassionate eye that will validate one's (lack of) experience. Important gender differences also emerge.

Boys, friends and sexual performance: between integration and strategy

In masculine discourses, the logic of integration is strictly articulated to that of strategy, i.e., with the formation of an identity as a resource, but one that is nevertheless placed at the service of integration with ascribed roles and expectations. Through integration, the group of friends ensures the internalisation of aspects that will structure the sexual Self, such as the value of orgasm and ejaculation

to the male performance, or the first ejaculation as a 'rite of passage'. As Cohan (2009) found, this adolescent talk, which is the basis of a *male fraternity*, is an important source of construction of male identity and sexuality. For boys, it is through talking with other male friends that these experiences can be internalised as relevant milestones, or stories of reference (Levinson 2001). The importance of *talking,* as a structuring friendship practice among same-sex friends that guarantees the passing on of information about 'what sex really is', appears in Filipe's discourse:

> *'Talking about what it was, talking about the first time; it was all among men (…) about what it meant to be an adolescent, about what puberty was, etc…. That was all with my male friends, some of them older, other of the same age, they already knew how it was, we heard talking about others, what ejaculation was, the first time, when it was going to happen. We were all wishing it to happen for the first time. When it did, one was going to tell the others. It was mainly a thing among men.'* [Filipe, 37].

This logic of integration is articulated with that of strategy, in the sense that such male attributes, in the developing and 'training' stage, constitute fundamental aspects of an *identity-as-resource*, composed of attributes of different kinds (v.g. bodily appearance and fitness, personality, relational skills, etc.), oriented to achieve certain aims (v.g. conquest). As Filipe says: '*two or three girls came to the group, they were the cutest in the village, and we were all after them. The "cute ones" were the ones with whom we tried to keep contact, which we would flirt with and date now and then*…'. In a context perceived as a 'market', in which 'cute girls' are scarce and the competition to conquer them is high, a sense of rivalry arises among boys. Belonging to an 'Us' (men, perceived as a 'masculine community'), as opposed to 'Them' (women), reinforces inclusion in the (male) group, and consequently the formation and consolidation of certain traits considered indispensable for such belonging. Women are looked at as an 'Other', an Alterity which is therefore defined not only by the masculine gaze, but also by masculine sexual performativity. This logic of competition was also found by Cohan (2009: 157), who talked about a 'discourse of conquest' that 'treats sexual activity for boys as an accomplishment'. In this process, women's subjectivity is denied, and female sex partners largely remain a means to an end (Cohan 2009: 157).

However, it is not always the case that the masculine experience of accessing information is structured in conversation and sharing of experiences. For those who are less integrated in groups of friends, or whose integration involves some kind of stigmatised experience, the discovery of the body and sex takes place in more private terms, either alone, or with a single significant member of the network, chosen as main confidant. That is how Luís, a gay man of 36, obtains information about masturbation. Coping with a non-heteronormative desire, he gets information mainly through educational books, as well as from a girlfriend who is younger than himself. His is a lonely experience: '*I spent much time at home, alone. So, I did it when I was alone.'* He never masturbated in the presence of other male (heterosexual) friends or schoolmates, and even today it is a practice he keeps to himself: '*It's something mine and mine alone.'* As such, non-heterosexual men like Luís challenge the normative friendship discourses and practices around hegemonic masculinity, highlighting instead the dynamic plurality of male identities, and the ways they are constantly negotiated in power relations (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005; Demetriou 2001). On the other hand, the practice of keeping silent about non-heteronormative desires may contribute to build masculinities as hybrid blocs 'that unite various and diverse practices in order to construct the best possible strategy for the reproduction of patriarchy' (Demetriou 2001: 348).

Within this framework of competition, oriented towards territorial conquest, it is among women that boys feel more comfortable talking about intimate matters. The figure of a female confidant emerges as a co-adjuvant of masculine experience, helping boys to cope with the pressure of keeping up with their male friends' expectations of high performance, achievement and success. For instance, to Antonio [39], it was always easier to talk about sex to girls than to other boys. A more equal relationship with girl mates gives him the chance to ask questions about the body and its intimate aspects, such as menstruation, reproduction and, indirectly, sexuality. However, it remains unclear whether this represents a move towards a version of masculinity more open to equality with women, or rather a conception of emphasised femininity that reinforces compliance with patriarchy (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005).

Girls, friends and sexual discursivity: between integration and subjectivation

Among girls, sharing of information about sexuality also depends on the degree of integration among friends. The most recurrent theme is menstruation, as a rite of passage to an age at which girls gain symbolic access to a world of specific discourses and practices, were femininity is constructed and reproduced across generations. Talk about menstruation is also linked to the reproductive side of sexuality – stressed much more in girls' discourses than in boys'. Sisters, best friends and school mates play a major role in this discursive entrance to the world of 'womanhood'. As such, friendship between girls becomes a means of fabricating positive gender identities in regard to sexuality and the relationship with the body (Roseneil & Budgeon 2004; Budgeon 2006). Apart from menstruation, girls share information about and experiences with the 'cutest boys': the 'first kiss', the first genital contacts and the first sexual intercourse. Between girls, the figure of the confidant – the 'best friend' – assumes a major role. Paula, 43, talks about her privileged relationship with one friend in particular, to whom she tells everything, including her '*concern about the orgasm, I think several of us were concerned about that. I felt a bit weirdo because I had never had a vaginal orgasm*'. Friends thus become relevant actors in these young girls' sexual scripts, with whom they can explore the diverse and experimental sides of their intimate stories, and incorporate 'pleasure' within their sexual self (Hoskins 2000; 2001).

Also, some scenarios are more conducive than others to the exploration of the body: through the practice of sports, in places like swimming pools and changing rooms, girls develop a growing ease with their bodies, or, on the contrary, inhibitions may begin to appear. Each girl's relationship with her own body will also play an important role in her integration within the group of friends. This is the case for Paula [43] and Madalena [32], who have practised sports regularly throughout their adolescence. To Paula, (girl) friends and sport mates are also confidants and reliable sources of information, particularly when, within the family, a dense veil of silence falls over matters of sexuality. For example, on the occasion of the first menstruation at the age of 10, at the beach, with summer vacation slowly coming to an end, she confided in a friend, who in turn told her mother. '*I remember that my mother came to me and said: "So, you've already had your debut." And then she said nothing else! Trying to talk it easy… but then never spoke about it again*.' It is therefore through older friends, as well as books and magazines, that Paula finds the information she needs. With these friends, she shares her doubts, information and experiences of many aspects of sexuality, including fear of penetration, pleasure, and masturbation. '*I know exactly how each one* [of my friends] *began her sexual life*.' If on the one hand these discourses may encapsulate the reproduction of heteronormative, gendered markers of sexual life, well established in cultural scenarios (Simon & Gagnon 1984), they also constitute the seed of resistance to them.

Sometimes, integration in the peer group is not as strong because integration within the family supersedes it. In these cases, friend-like relations among siblings resemble suffusion patterns of intimate bonds (Spencer & Pahl 2006). This is seen in the case of Sandra [34], whose sisters replace friends in the role of supporters and confidants. Slight age differences between them enable them to share friends and experiences. However, they don't talk explicitly about sex, at least not until they reach a certain age, which seems to indicate that, as far as sexuality and sexual talk is concerned, there are limits to suffusion.

However, friends are not always looked on as collaborators. It is mainly when the logic of integration articulates itself with that of strategy that competition can arise among friends. But competition among girls, unlike that among boys, not only remains hidden in many cases, but also has different impacts. Competition is stimulated from the outside (by boys and men), but is also a result of the internalisation of gendered norms and expectations in regard to sexuality (as when *should* one begin sexual activity, how many partners *should* one have, how can and *should* one conquer new partners). A frail identity-as-resource (one in which the individual does not see him/herself as owning real attributes with which to win the competition), associated with non-recognition of the game and its rules (not to mention the necessary skills for putting them into practice), helps to feed a stronger identity-as-integration among women. In this sense, friendship practices contribute to the performance of a kind of femininity that is, if not controlled, at least shaped by the masculine gaze. For these girls, the idea of a 'male in the head' (Holland et al. 1998: 13) that dictates the norms of behaviour is built through shared talk and practices among friends. The 'need to belong' to a feminine category that matches this 'male in the head' configures their strong identity-as-integration, and outlines a hegemonic femininity that is central to male-dominant gender relations (Schippers 2007).

This is so in the case of Sandra. She is mainly compared with her best friend, who is '*more experienced and with more boyfriends*'. The rivalry among girls is externally stimulated by boys: '*He was always comparing us, saying I was prettier, but her legs were better shaped, that my breasts were bigger but her hips were whatever*… [laughter]'. Paradoxically, this competition intensifies the intimacy between friends, who increasingly share information about boys and experiences: '*it was with this friend of mine that my first interest in boys begun, which boys were cuter and more handsome, which weren't*…'

However, not everything can be shared with friends: grey zones of shadow and secrecy endure. That is why Paula never shares with anyone her first sexual experiences with her older cousin, which took place during early adolescence. Nor does Mariana ever share her masturbation practices with anyone. Fernando keeps to himself how humiliating it was to be forced to expose his circumcised sexual organ. This area of silence also means freedom for the social actor, with his/her will to protect and manage his/her privacy and identity. Secrecy thus may play a major role in his/her constitution as a sexual subject (logic of subjectivation).

Final remarks

In this article, I have tried to argue that a close relation can be found between friendship practices and the formation of a sexual self. Along the life course, it is during adolescence and the long transition

from youngster to adult that the role of friends (usually included in the broader category of the *peer group*) first appears as relevant to the formation of the sexual self. In this phase, friends ensure access to and sharing of both relevant information and experiences of sexuality; and, at least for a while, they surpass family and other meaningful others in importance.

Through approaching the subject from a sociology of experience (Dubet 1994; 2005) perspective, and using the concept of sexual experience, defined as a tension between three logics of action (integration, strategy and subjectivation; Author 2014), light is shed on the role of friends at this stage of life. Invited to reconstruct and narrate their sexual biographies, the participants in this study reflected on their past experiences during childhood and youth. To them, the influence of friends during these periods of life is mainly dictated by the logic of *integration*: the need to belong to certain, more or less abstract, groups (a certain generation, a 'cool gang' to be part of, etc.). The way actors adhere (or not) to ascribed roles is determinant in understanding their sexual practices, representations and values. Moreover, such a process of integration is a gendered one: while the experience of boys can be better understood by a tension between integration and strategy (competition, game), that of girls can be better understood as a mixture of integration and subjectivation (the need to conquer for themselves a space of autonomy and valued identity).

Results showed, for the participants in the study, the importance of *talk* as a reflexive friendship practice, in the form of sharing relevant information about sexuality, as well as learning about the (normative) milestones of sexual life: when, how and with whom they 'should' happen. Although talk turns out to be relevant for both boys and girls in the sample, there are, nevertheless, important gender differences. Among boys the logic of integration is strictly articulated to that of strategy, i.e., to the formation of an identity-as-resource, whereby boys have to perform and achieve more successfully than their friends, seen mainly as competitors. Among girls, integration and belonging to the group are mostly associated with subjectivation, i.e., the need to conquer a space where they may detach themselves from normative expectations of their sexual behaviour. In other words, integration in the group of friends is determinant for the formation of both boys' and girls' sexual selves. What varies is how they do this, and the ways in which they comply with what kind of norms. While boys are predominantly oriented towards competition and strategic management of their friendships and sexual relations, girls are mostly focused on managing their identities, complying with, resisting or reinventing existing norms. Accordingly, friendship practices such as talk and reflexive discourse – which is close to what Holmes & Greco (2011) called *emotional reflexivity* – are mostly used by women in the process of managing their sexual life, as a way of bonding with their friends and, at the same time, of reinterpreting the events of their sexual life. As such, results showed that the ways in which friendship practices interact with sexuality are relevant to the better understanding of how gender is performed in everyday practices.

However, results also underlined the importance of silence (for example, avoiding talking about one's masturbation practices) as an emancipatory practice. Silence thus becomes "another side" of discursive (friendship) practices. It may emerge as a negative side of experience, a form of social control or repression, as when families refuse to talk about sex with their children. But it also emerges as a positive dimension of experience, as when some of the participants make use of silence as a way of reclaiming for themselves a space of privacy, autonomy and self-determination, within their groups of friends. Rather than denying the importance of discourse, I argue that silence *and* talk are distinct,

sometimes even complementary, ways of coping with the emotions and affects triggered by sexual life (such as shame, excitement, curiosity, anxiety to perform 'well', etc.).

In this article, I have tried to make a contribution to friendship studies, as well as to sexuality studies, by linking these two areas through the theoretical perspective of the sociology of experience. I have tried to do this by highlighting how sexual experience is shaped by relevant friendship practices, some of which sometimes merge with sexual practices. One of the major limitations of this study is the fact that it draws on a small-scale sample, the results being very much attached to a particular group of middle class, white, people, from one particular national context (Portugal). These methodological choices were mainly dictated by a broader theoretical goal of testing the individualization hypothesis to the particular topic of the making of sexual trajectories, in this southern European country. Such an approach shed light onto the particular ways sexual life intertwines itself with other dimensions of social life, through every day practices – including friendship practices. However, if and to what extent these same patterns can be found in other cultural contexts (different social class, national context, ethnic or rural background) remains to be further explored, and constitutes one line of future research. Further studies should also explore the relevance of the hypotheses I advance here to other stages of the life trajectory and of sexual life, other than adolescence and transition to adulthood, as well as to age cohorts. Also, as friendship increasingly becomes a reference point for private life, challenging its heteronormative boundaries, the ways in which this impacts on sexual behaviour and identities should constitute a relevant line of enquiry.

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[i] Further information about the method can be found at Author 2011 – Annex 5, pages 405-407 (in Portuguese).